"Blood Don't Lie": The Diseased Family in Flannery O'Connor's Everything That Rises Must Converge

Susanna Gilbert *

Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness...Stories are antibodies against illness and pain.
--Anatole Broyard, Intoxicated by My Illness

Asbury lay with a rigid outraged stare while the privacy of his blood was invaded by this idiot. "Slowly Lord but sure," Block sang in a murmuring voice, "Oh slowly Lord but sure." When the syringe was full, he withdrew the needle. "Blood don't lie," he said.
--Flannery O'Connor, "The Enduring Chill"

The wolf, I'm afraid, is inside tearing up the place.
--Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being

At the age of thirty-nine, Flannery O'Connor succumbed to her body's battle with itself. Stricken when she was twenty-five with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, the autoimmune disorder that eventually took her life and that killed her father before her, O'Connor spent the last fourteen years of her life a dependent invalid in her mother's home. In this essay I will argue that O'Connor's struggle with lupus makes its way into her fiction not only literally--through images of blood, disease, death, and twisted parent-child relationships--but figuratively as well. Specifically, I will suggest that many of the stories in O'Connor's final collection, Everything That Rises Must Converge, replicate not only the dynamics of her relationship with her parents but, more interestingly, the dynamics of her disease--its omnipresent symptoms; sudden, surprising ferocity; and, most importantly, its grotesque drama of the self against the self.

Many critics acknowledge the importance of O'Connor's life story to her fiction. The literary critic Josephine Hendin goes so far as to say that "Flannery O'Connor seems to have lived out a fiction and written down her life." Hendin's argument rests on the fact that, as a nice Southern lady and dutiful daughter, O'Connor couldn't express in her everyday life in Milledgeville, Georgia, "in a milieu that is horribly embarrassed by anything unconventional," her feelings of "otherness" and "difference," her "impotent rage" at a disease that was slowly killing her, and her distaste for a modern secular society. Because of this restrictive milieu, Hendin contends, O'Connor "found a way out of her unpretty situation by denying it"; meanwhile, as I too will argue, her feelings about that situation bled into her fiction.

Other scholars note the importance to O'Connor's writing of her Southern roots, her lifelong interest in fiction and cartoons, her fragile health, her Catholic upbringing, and her adamant faith. Most of these critics, however, emphasize the influence of Catholicism on her writing. They often rely on O'Connor's famous declaration that "I see from the standpoint of Christian Orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction."

While many critics read such statements by the author as "transparent" and undebatable, others like Robert Fitzgerald feel that "nothing could be worse than to treat [her stories] as problems for exegesis or texts to preach on." Hendin even speculates that "[r]eligion could have been an effective way [for O'Connor] to both express and contain fury of a very irreligious kind." In my view, theological interpretations of O'Connor's work can be illuminating, but alone they are reductive and unsatisfying for they tend to assimilate the existential bleakness of her fiction into a mode of tidy allegorizing that fails adequately to account for the bitterness that informs her art. This bitterness can be better understood if we consider the author's daily life and read more attentively her statements, silences, and fiction itself, which all point to the centrality of her strangely self-destructive disease in her imagination. Despite O'Connor's insistence that "the
disease is of no consequence to my writing since for that [writing] I use my head and not my feet," I will argue here that her life-threatening disease surely had a profound impact on both her "head" and her fiction, an impact that might finally help explain the darkness that has puzzled so many critics for so long. 9

My argument is based to a great extent on the dominating presence lupus had in O'Connor's life. Although O'Connor did not like to admit that lupus influenced any aspect of her world profoundly, her case intruded far too regularly in her daily life to be discounted lightly. Furthermore, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, or SLE, can be a life-threatening disease whose "course is totally unpredictable." 10 From an early age O'Connor knew of lupus's volatility because her father struggled with it for years and was a relatively young man when it killed him. She knew of the condition's danger, too, because when she first became ill in 1950, the doctors were so concerned they told Regina O'Connor that her daughter was "dying." 11 Of course, she survived that first serious episode and, for most of the fourteen years left her, due to dietary and medical restrictions, her lupus was in remission. She never knew, though, when, as she put it, "the wolf inside" would start "tearing up the place" (p. 591). At crisis moments in the disease, especially during the last months of her life, O'Connor expressed fear in her letters as she asked her correspondents for prayers and told them, "I am sick of being sick" (p. 581).

In the context of such unnerving uncertainty, O'Connor gave up earlier attempts at independent living and moved to her mother's farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. There, lupus dictated to a great extent how the author's daily life was organized. She followed a staid domestic routine. Every morning, she had only enough energy to write one to three hours, and by the afternoon she was exhausted: "I am tired every afternoon and there's nothing to be done about it. It's the nature of the disease" (p. 252). Often, she was restricted to a salt-free diet. When she first became ill, as many as four times a day she had to give herself shots of ACTH, the steroids she took most of her adult life. And, unfortunately, large doses of steroids had unpleasant side-effects, some of which were hard to distinguish from the disease's symptoms: hair loss, water retention, and swelling of the face; exhausting, accelerated mental activity that kept her up at night; and, most important, deterioration of her hip bones, which led to a need for crutches. [End Page 116]

As Lorine Getz observes, O'Connor "appears lighthearted and almost sportive about her condition" in "her few recorded references," which is strange considering the seriousness and intrusiveness of her illness. 12 In some letters, however, even she expressed discomfort at her reliance on crutches, not so much because she had to use them but because of other people's reactions to them. While she claimed in one letter that "they worry the onlooker more than the user" (p. 164), in two other missives she revealed how the onlooker's worry could worry her. In these two letters, she told anecdotes of kindly, Southern women who "blessed" her and called her "sugar" when they saw her on crutches, at which she admitted she felt patronized--"I'll be real glad when I get too old for them to sugar me" (p. 120)--and hostile--"exactly like the Misfit" (p. 117), the homicidal maniac in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Such admissions of resentment and anger about her condition were rare, though. Most often in her correspondence she claimed she didn't "mind the crutches a bit" (p. 174), she was "used to them" (p. 127) and, indeed, was fascinated by how they "make a big difference in the tempo you live at" (p. 109). At least in this latter remark she acknowledged the impact lupus had on her daily life.

Besides being unpredictable, frightening, exhausting, intrusive, and embarrassing, O'Connor's "energy-depriving ailment" (p. 117) limited her mobility in the world. As her reputation increased, she managed to give readings and talks at a fair number of colleges, but she didn't have the strength to speak too often. On numerous occasions, trips (to visit her good friends, the Fitzgerals, in Connecticut or to the pilgrimage site, Lourdes, for example) were canceled, abbreviated or postponed by her doctors. And since Milledgeville was not highly stimulating intellectually, in her isolation she relied on visitors and visitors by proxy in the form of letters. She cajoled her friends regularly in writing to visit her. "I am not liable to reach the city again," she explained to a friend in November of 1956, "--not anyway until I am rich enough to ride everywhere in taxis and have a personal robot to tote the bags. Whereas you on your two feet could come to see me handily" (p. 182). While more will be affirmed and speculated about the ways lupus influenced O'Connor's psyche and
situation, it should be clear by now that it shaped much of the artist's daily existence. When asked about the disease's impact on her writing, however, O'Connor insisted that "[m]y lupus has no business in literary considerations" (p. 380).

At the same time, during rare, less guarded moments, the author did acknowledge a connection between her illness and her art. For example, in one letter to "A," one of her more intimate correspondents, O'Connor spoke of her first serious struggle with lupus in 1951: "[D]uring this time I was more or less living my life and H. Mote's [the protagonist of Wise Blood who blinds himself] too and as my disease affected the joints, I conceived the notion that I would eventually become paralyzed and was going blind and that in the book I had spelled out my own course, or that in the illness I had spelled out the book" (sic, p. 118). In another letter, she confided that Hulga, the sullen, crippled heroine of "Good Country People," "[is] a projection of myself" (p. 106).

Usually, though, her admissions of the illness's influence on her fiction were more tenuous. For instance, she was willing to acknowledge the distance her consciousness naturally kept from her unconscious motivations. She commented in other correspondence to "A" that "[w]hat personal problems are worked out in stories must be unconscious" (p. 149); that "I won't ever be able entirely to understand my own work or even my own motivations" (p. 92); and, finally, that "I don't know why the bull and Mrs. May have to die, or why Mr. Fortune or Mary Fortune: I just feel in my bones that that is the way it has to be. If I had the abstraction first I don't suppose I would write the story" (p. 178, emphasis mine).

Despite her usual denial of the effect lupus had on her imagination, then, O'Connor conceded that her violent writing was much more a matter of her unconscious or "bones" than her brain. Ironically, while she commonly insisted on a rigid Cartesian split between mind and body, claiming that the disease "is of no consequence to my writing since for that I use my head and not my feet," it seems the wellspring of her art was actually the "feeling in her bones," both her lupus-stricken "bones" and the intuitive, unconscious part of herself. She did not start with "abstraction" for, she wondered, what then would be the use in writing stories?

These statements suggest an important way in which O'Connor's anxieties about and experiences with her ailment functioned for her art: rather than being neatly disposed of by being denied and made light of, such feelings and experiences seem to have fueled much of her fiction. In an essay on literature and illness, Anatole Broyard takes it for granted that anxiety serves an author in just this way, but he goes further in suggesting that sick people in general may use, and feel the healing effects of using, anxiety about their maladies to write: "Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness...Just as a novelist turns his anxiety into a story in order to be able to control it [End Page 118] to a degree, so a sick person can make a story, a narrative, out of his illness as a way of trying to detoxify it." 13

The obsessively reiterative nature of O'Connor's art further suggests that she was trying, through writing fiction, to tell the story of her illness, a story she constructed over and over again to "detoxify" herself or to "work something out." Other critics have noted the repetitiveness of her fiction, the way in which she continually conjures up in different narratives almost identical settings, family structures, characters, and plots. 14 Significantly, these stock narrative elements often bear a striking resemblance to their counterparts in O'Connor's life. Furthermore, they commonly resemble aspects of what must have been the most anxiety-inducing force in her life, lupus. If, as I am speculating here, repressed thoughts and feelings about this disease are the source of much of O'Connor's fiction, then it should be no surprise when they surface or "return" in that fiction that they do so over and over again, compulsively. It is in just this way, through repetition, that the repressed labors are able to be heard and to "detoxify" the patient. 15

Examples of almost obsessive narrative repetition, and especially of fictional elements that mirror O'Connor's own life, are abundant in Everything That Rises Must Converge. Most of the stories in this final collection center on diseased families and specifically on twisted parent-child relationships. In the first tales I will discuss, families are dysfunctional mainly because psychological or physical disease paralyzes adult "children."
Often, as in the title story, "Greenleaf," "The Enduring Chill," and "The Comforts of Home," hostile, sulky young men live with and depend upon their mothers well beyond their adolescent years. The widowed mothers in these tales set no clear restraints on their adult children. Inexplicably, their offspring feel victimized and trapped by them nonetheless. These sons resent their positions but seem powerless to change. Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," for instance, feels his life with his mother is a "martyrdom," but while promising that "Someday I'll start making money...he knew he never would." 16

Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" -- at thirty-five one of the oldest of these overgrown boys -- feels similarly martyred at home. He tries reasoning with his mother, whom he considers "not logical" (p. 127) and overly altruistic about the true character of Star Drake, the juvenile delinquent to whom she's opened her doors, but she remains unremoved. He then issues ultimatums and threatens to leave but, when put to the test, does not act on his word. "Overcome by rage" (p. 116) yet aware of his impotence, he bemoans "in a limp voice" the fact that [End Page 119] he can't simply "put his foot down" as his father did before him (p. 127).

Similarly antagonistic mother-son relationships are central to "Greenleaf," and again aging sons lack the initiative to vacate their childhood homes. The widowed Mrs. May "work[s] and slave[s]...struggle[s] and sweat[s] to keep [her] place" (p. 29) for her two grown sons, neither of whom helps her on the farm or shows her any respect. Despite their passivity and filial contempt, both sons choose to stay with their mother, and Mrs. May allows them to stay. The eldest, Scofield, explains that he won't marry until after his mother is dead, and even then he won't leave her house. Wesley, the younger, is sickly; he never wants to marry since "Wesley [doesn't] like nice girls. He [doesn't] like anything." His outspoken hatred for everything is described in detail, "[b]ut in spite of all he said, he never made any move to leave" (pp. 34-35).

Finally, in "The Enduring Chill," Asbury, an aspiring young author, comes home believing he is doing so to die. He finds out instead that the "chill" he has contracted will not do him in as he hoped but will "endure" for the rest of his days. The "enduring chill" of his life will be to spend his adult years a cloistered invalid in his mother's home. His resentment of and rebellion against his mother are evident throughout the story, even in an initial act of drinking unpasteurized milk on her dairy farm, which leads, ironically, to the trapped position he loathes so much in the end. Ultimately, he feels powerless to change his dependence on his mother because of his chronic illness: "He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror" (p. 114).

Among these three stories, "The Enduring Chill" most closely parallels the author's own life. First, O'Connor, like Asbury, lived in New York as an ambitious young writer only to return to her widowed mother's dairy farm at the onset of her illness. Second, she was a literal, physical invalid, not just an emotional one like Julian, Thomas, and Scofield, and not simply one marred, like Wesley, by a transient childhood fever. Finally, and most interestingly, just as Asbury contracts his lifelong sickness from his "mother's milk," O'Connor probably at least felt as if she inherited her disease from her father's "blood."

Yet if "The Enduring Chill" specifically replicates many aspects of O'Connor's life, the autobiographical resonances in all three of these narratives are undeniable. O'Connor writes continually about incapacitated adults doomed to live as children under their widowed mothers' roofs. Although O'Connor was not powerless as a writer, thinker, or [End Page 120] breadwinner, she had little control over much of her experience: her disease was incurable; and, in many practical ways, she could not help but depend on her mother. Furthermore, as I've already shown, lupus confined her most of the time to Milledgeville and, indeed, to her mother's house. It seems probable, then, that the resentment and entrapment she expresses over and over again in her fiction she felt too at times as lupus limited and dictated her life.

To be sure, while these narratives record some of O'Connor's literal domestic situation, the animosity her fictional adult children feel towards their mothers often has violent consequences that certainly never ensued in the author's life. Either through contempt or passive-aggressive behavior like Julian's or the May boys', or through more active hostility like that of Thomas, the overgrown children in these tales at least injure and
more often violently bring to death the powerful mothers they resent. In these attacks, Julian, Thomas, and the May boys live out the fantasies of infantalized adult children: to assault and, indeed, kill the mothers upon whom they indignantly depend and to bring them down from what must seem to their offspring like unnaturally authoritative positions. Conceivably, O'Connor herself found relief from dependence on her own mother (which she must, as a grown woman, at times have found demeaning) by expressing repressed rage in the fantasy of fiction. 17

In addition to mirroring much of what she experienced and probably felt spending her days as an invalid in her mother's home, most of the stories in this final collection reflect, often in a cryptic, schematic fashion, a more primal darkness that O'Connor had to confront, a concern with human fallibility and with the perverseness, absurdity, and injustice of fate. O'Connor's vision is arguably tuned to the grotesque because two things she probably expected she could trust at least for a little while, her father and her body, betrayed her early on in such ways that she must have seemed like bizarre ways. Her father died, abandoning her but leaving a poison legacy of the illness that killed him, and her body turned on her in a similar fashion. As a result, her message in much of her fiction is that we are always already fallen, that what ought to protect us might very well destroy us, and that, indeed, for that reason we must look to another world for healing. Two works included in her last volume of stories, "A View of the Woods" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," illustrate this dark philosophy most strikingly through the metaphor of the diseased family.

These stories foreground troubled relationships between father figures and children, relationships that arguably reflect O'Connor's own bond of physical disease, of tainted blood, with her father. For O'Connor, fathers, instead of protecting, often abandon or kill their children, usually dying in the process themselves. In over half of the stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge, fathers are absent or dead at the outset of the narrative. In "A View of the Woods" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," father figures are alive, but they destroy both their offspring and themselves in the course of the stories. Although O'Connor is not explicit about it, we are led to believe that Mr. Fortune's weak heart gives out at the end of "A View of the Woods" after he's killed his granddaughter. Furthermore, while Grandfather Fortune is the primary caretaker/father figure for Mary, her real father, Mr. Pitts, does exist, and, significantly, his major purpose in the story is to attack his daughter for anything that goes wrong. She is the innocent victim of her father's beatings in the woods, acts whose reality she continually denies much as O'Connor denies her "battering" disease. Finally, in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Sheppard doesn't physically die but is spiritually broken, "reel[s] back" (p. 190) in horror, when he discovers he's driven his son to suicide.

In both these stories it is the children's "fortune" to be destroyed by "fathers" who can't see them for what they are, who don't nurture and protect them as their parental roles require. Indeed, Grandfather Fortune is so blind when it comes to his granddaughter that he barely recognizes her as a separate human being. Granted, the narrator tells us, she does look like her grandpa--"her face [was] a small replica of the old man's"--still, the narrator goes on to explain, "[n]o one was particularly glad that Mary Fortune looked like her grandfather except the old man himself. He thought it added greatly to her attractiveness" (p. 55). Moreover, "the fact that Mary Fortune was a Pitts too," was separate and different, "was something he ignored in a gentlemanly fashion....He liked to think of her as being thoroughly of his clay" (p. 58). As the "huge yellow monster [machine]...gorg[es] itself on clay" (p. 81) in the name of capitalist progress in this story, Mr. Fortune gorges his ego on his own "clay," never recognizing it as other than himself.

O'Connor elaborates on Mr. Fortune's egomaniacal view of Mary as the supposedly objective narrative voice begins to converge with Fortune's own: "[S]he was like him on the inside too. She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive. Though there was seventy years' difference in their ages, the spiritual distance between them was slight" (p. 55). This narrative perspective is plainly not objective but tainted by Fortune's narcissistic desires. We [End Page 122] start to understand this in the course of the tale as it becomes obvious that, far from "slight," the "spiritual distance" between Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter is, in fact, great. Mary fights her grandfather "with stout brown school shoes and small
In "The Lame Shall Enter First," instead of considering his son, Norton, an extension of himself, Sheppard rejects any connection with the boy, viewing him as all that's negative in his secular, social-scientific philosophy. Again, like Fortune, Sheppard is blind to his child's character and so can't provide the care his son requires. Sheppard convinces himself that Norton is "selfish"--the deadliest sin in this father's worldly "religion"--because he eats chocolate cake for breakfast, would keep a thousand dollars if he won it rather than "spend it on children less fortunate than [himself]" (p. 147), and, according to Sheppard, has no idea "what it means to share" (p. 144). Meanwhile, Norton is really a sensitive little boy in deep pain over the loss of his mother. He must express this suffering for both himself and his father because Sheppard censors their sorrow believing that Norton's especially "was not a normal grief. It was all part of his [Norton's] selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child's grief should not last so long" (p. 146). Instead of comforting Norton, Sheppard judges and misunderstands him. Completely oblivious to the emotional meaning of the boy's search for his mother through a telescope, Sheppard condemns as unscientific Norton's sighting of her in the sky. Just as Mary cherishes a view of the woods that her grandfather doesn't understand, Norton sees something in the stars that his father is too blind to see. In both narratives, the child in his/her spiritual and emotional integrity represents an urge towards health, a part of the sick parent figure that that figure lacks, can't recognize, and so destroys.

Obviously, on one level these stories are allegories of spiritual vision in conflict with secular sight. At the same time, the recurrent plot of father figures misinterpreting and hurting children they ought to protect recalls the deadly physical bond O'Connor had with her father. She discusses this connection herself in her letters:

My father wanted to write but had not the time or money or training or any of the opportunities I have had. I am never likely to romanticize him because I carry around most of his faults as well as his tastes. I even have about his same constitution: I have the same disease....Anyway, whatever I do in the way of writing makes me extra happy in the thought that it is a fulfillment of what he wanted to do himself. (Habit of Being, 168)

While she identified positively with her father as a writer, O'Connor clearly also saw his legacy as damaging. Considering her ties with her parents, it is significant that offspring don't die in stories like "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Greenleaf," "The Comforts of Home," and "The Enduring Chill," stories concerning twisted relationships between children and their mothers. Rather it is in important tales about diseased relationships with father figures that offspring are destroyed. Both in O'Connor's life and in some of her most striking fiction, mothers are resented but fathers misjudge and destroy.

Perhaps even more intriguingly, this diseased family plot in O'Connor's final stories often replicates the dynamics of her fatal illness, lupus. As discussed earlier, lupus for O'Connor was unpredictable, frightening, exhausting, intrusive, confining, and sometimes even embarrassing. The disease has other characteristics too, though, that are reflected in O'Connor's fiction. First, it is a mysterious illness: its etiology is unknown; and, while it is systemic, the location and intensity of its symptoms are unpredictable. "Manifestations referable to any organ system may appear." For example, "Renal involvement may be benign and asymptomatic or relentlessly progressive and fatal." In O'Connor's case, it was fatal. Second, SLE is deceptive. Because it exhibits such a range of features, lupus is classified--like syphilis, tuberculosis, and malaria--as "a 'great imitator'" and often misdiagnosed. Third, it is a disease of the blood in a number of senses. Severe SLE, like that experienced by O'Connor early and late in the course of her illness, can cause hemolytic anemia, and since there is strong evidence that the afflicted have a genetic predisposition to the disorder, lupus is probably a sickness of blood or genealogy, too. In addition, the disease makes itself manifest in the blood in the form of antinuclear antibodies. Finally, as an autoimmune disorder, lupus seems by nature perverse, characterized as it is by the self turning against the self. In this illness, the very mechanisms designed to
protect life, the antibodies, destroy life as they become unable to distinguish outside enemies from the flesh they are meant to defend.

In sum, in addition to symptoms and side-effects mentioned earlier, Flannery O'Connor had to contend on a daily basis with a disease of mysterious origin that might emerge almost anywhere and anytime in her body, that followed an unpredictable and often highly [End Page 124] destructive course, that was deceptive, that targeted her blood, that killed her father before her, and that resulted from her body perversely waging war on itself. It hardly seems coincidental that her fiction often has similar qualities. Violence, for example, is a mainstay of her stories and, thus, at the heart of O'Connor criticism. But where does it come from? And why is it always there? In her essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor offers a theological explanation, and many critics have attempted to round out her analysis. 22 What is perhaps most striking about brutality in her fiction, however, is not what it represents but the fact that it is an inevitable presence. Like her illness with its unknown etiology, the violence in her tales is, on some level, an inexplicable given, and the reader learns simply to expect it in the narrow world of her fiction.

In addition, this literary violence, like the destructiveness of lupus, arises suddenly and often in shocking ways. The brutal deaths of characters in these stories always come as a surprise. Many of them occur in seemingly benign environments and at the hands of those the victims think they can trust: a woman has a stroke and dies on a city sidewalk after being struck with a handbag and ridiculed by her son; another woman is gored by a bull in her scenic pasture; in her own home, a third woman is shot by her son; an old man beats his favorite granddaughter to death in the woods she loves and then himself collapses; and a little boy hangs himself in the family attic. In the mundane contexts of these tales, this brutality usually catches one off guard. Settings and characters that appear, if strange, still rather innocuous turn out to harbor destruction. One is left with the feeling that anywhere or anytime violence might break through the narrative's deceptive veneer of normalcy. And, of course, such deceptive normalcy coupled with unpredictable violence is again reminiscent of O'Connor's life with lupus. The malady's brutal eruptions always came as a surprise, and the severity of each attack was also hard to predict. Uncertainty and risk constituted the fabric of O'Connor's daily life, a daily life that on the surface was genteel and controlled.

No matter how it looked superficially, then, O'Connor's quotidian life was haunted by blood, and not just by her father's heritage but by the fluid in her veins. When the lupus was active, O'Connor was extremely anemic. Unfortunately, in 1964, the year of her death, she was also anemic because of a benign fibroid tumor, the removal of which reactivated her lupus. She needed transfusions often the last months of her life, and her blood had to be constantly monitored. Similarly, during her terrible bout with the disease in 1951, she required "about 10 [End Page 125] transfusions." 23 Obviously, blood was not simply an abstraction for O'Connor but a highly visible physical presence in her life.

As might be expected, her last letters reveal that she was preoccupied with her health, but especially with her blood count. In January of 1964, for instance, all month she reported her blood count to correspondents, concluding on 27 January with the information that, "My blood count has gone up from 8.5 to 11.6 in a month and the doctor thinks that's phenomenal. Around 13 is normal and I'll make it yet" (p. 564). Later, she learned that her anemia was not due solely to her tumor, but to lupus. "Dr. Burrell says I have declared a moratorium on making blood--something that apparently happens in lupus" (p. 578). Six weeks before her death, she revealed to a friend how anemic she really was: "I've had four blood transfusions in the last month. The trouble is mostly kidneys" (p. 587). As her kidneys continued to fail, she continued to need transfusions and to be preoccupied with her debilitatingly low blood count.

O'Connor scholars usually read the prevalent blood imagery in her stories in terms of Catholicism and as specifically alluding to Christ's blood. 24 Considering the centrality and visibility of blood in O'Connor's life, however, the ubiquity of it and colors associated with it in her fiction might also be another way lupus became metaphor in her art. Notably, blood is not restricted to characters' veins, to discussions of blood pressure and blood tests, but it seeps into her entire fictional landscape, coloring the sky, roads, and trees. On
a literal level, of course, blood pressure and blood pathology are crucial to the plots of a number of stories in O'Connor's final collection. In the title story and "A View of the Woods," Julian's mother and Grandfather Fortune have dangerously high blood pressure. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury's "blood don't lie" in a pathology report as it reveals his undulant fever. Additionally, however, the whole world is often bloody in her tales: the sky "crimson" (p. 114); the sun "a swollen red ball" (p. 47); the landscape split by a "red road" (pp. 69, p. 88) and bordered by trees "bathed in blood" (p. 71). Blood, like lupus, is systemic, anywhere and anywhere in O'Connor's work. Arguably, the horrifying experience of being attacked by a mysterious, volatile enemy that targeted her blood and came from her father's bloodline colored her sense of the world, becoming a leitmotif in her life and so in her art.

Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of lupus, though, is the fact that the body nonsensically destroys itself and, in O'Connor's case, with a constitution her father bequeathed her. The perversity of both an autoimmune system and a father turning on their charge is figured in [End Page 126] much of O'Connor's fiction as the drama of the "converging" self. Because this grotesque aspect of lupus is at the heart of the disease and because grotesquity forms the core of many of her stories, I would like to return briefly to "A View of the Woods" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," where this drama of the self destroying the self is played out with special force.

The internal battle that results from lupus is represented in "A View of the Woods" by the struggle between Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter, and in "The Lame Shall Enter First" by the conflicting relationship between Sheppard and Norton. By virtue of the fact that the child is flesh of the adult's flesh, in each story the two conflicting characters in a sense represent one conflicted self. The first narrative contains especially strong doppelganger imagery. 25 Mary and Mr. Fortune are linked particularly by appearance. Over and over again, Mary's face is described as "a small replica of the old man's." In addition, in Mr. Fortune's eyes, "she was like him on the inside too" (p. 55). Finally, the split self that they represent is expressed especially vividly at the end of the narrative when Mary explodes in rage at the sale of "the lawn" and physically attacks her grandfather: Fortune "seemed to see his own face coming to bite him from several sides at once"; later in that physical struggle, "[p]ale identical eye looked into pale identical eye," as "[t]he old man looked up into his own image" (pp. 79, 89). It is easy to conclude from these examples that Fortune and Mary stand for two sides of one conflicted individual, an argument Tony Magistrale, among others, makes when he says the grandfather represents "modern capitalism," while Mary signifies his neglected "spiritual self." 26 By contrast, far from viewing Norton as an extension of himself, Sheppard repudiates him. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Norton is flesh of Sheppard's flesh, he and his father, too, stand for one self. More important, since they are foils for each other thematically, they can be read as one conflicted self. They oppose each other thematically much the way Fortune and Mary do, for Sheppard embraces the secular world, while Norton cherishes the invisible.

The self in the two narratives at issue is diseased, like O'Connor's lupus-stricken body, because the adult side, the part that should protect, damages the child side when it misconstrues the child's needs. While Mr. Fortune misinterprets Mary by seeing her as nothing more than a "replica" of himself, Sheppard misinterprets his offspring by not seeing enough of a connection between them, i.e., he denies that the grief Norton feels is also his own. This parental misunderstanding, while to some extent mirroring O'Connor's troubled biological relationship with [End Page 127] her father, also reflects the fatal misjudgement of O'Connor's own antibodies, a misjudgement that is ironic since the antibodies "think" they're doing the right thing, think they're protecting the body when actually they're attacking it. The bleak irony of her fiction, the perversity and falleness of her characters and their world (often considered simply characteristic of the "southern grotesque") can, at least partially, be explained by this dark irony of her body. 27

Like her body's antibodies, Fortune and Sheppard, too, think they're caring for their offspring, don't understand that they are, in fact, hurting them. To Mr. Fortune, for instance, it was "an ugly mystery" (p. 69) why Mary submitted to Pitts's beatings or what she saw across the road. In his mind, "there was nothing over there to see" (p. 70). Fortune thought "he had trained her so well" (p. 69); he's shocked by her behavior and, in trying to re-train her, destroys her. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Sheppard concludes that Norton's
"problem" arises from the fact that he "has never had to divide anything in his life" (p. 159). Accordingly, the father asks Rufus Johnson, another child, to move in for awhile so he can teach Norton "what it means to share" (p. 159). Throughout the story, Sheppard tries to lead or "shepherd" both Rufus and Norton down a path of secular morality that neither child wishes to follow. In the end Sheppard does not realize until too late how much of what he is calling Norton's "problem" is really his own, how he "did more for [Rufus] than [he] did for [his] own child" (p. 189), and how Rufus, instead of helping Norton, becomes a kind of satanic force in Norton's life, who, to some extent, inspires the child's suicide.

Finally, these stories that on one level are documentaries of the dynamics of O'Connor's illness are from another perspective fantasies of rebellion or escape. As I've already indicated, O'Connor's disease was at times uncontrollable and always incurable. She couldn't beat the affliction or escape it in life. Thus, in the two stories just discussed, the abused children, with whom she and her once healthy body are metaphorically associated, attempt to live out these alternate fantasies for her. Unfortunately, like O'Connor, they are overpowered by their antagonistic protectors. Physically beaten by her father and psychologically steamrolled by her grandfather, Mary Fortune, "red-faced and wild-looking" (p. 76), passionately retaliates in a last act before her death. She rebels against her grandpa's decision to destroy the "view" by beating him as she has continually been beaten by her father. "She was on him so quickly that he could not have recalled which blow he felt first....she seemed to be everywhere, coming at him from all directions at once. It was as if he were being attacked not by one child [End Page 128] but by a pack of small demons" (p. 79). Mary also rebels by asserting her independence, by distancing herself from her grandfather's bloodline and identifying with the Pittses. She fights her fate, i.e., Mr. "Fortune," and dares "to call [herself] Pitts" (p. 80), but neither effort changes her situation on earth. Momentarily she physically dominates her grandfather, but he still manages to "reverse their positions" (p. 80) and destroy her.

In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Norton handles the struggle with his father quite differently. Ignored, denigrated, misunderstood, and pressured to follow a secular course that he does not find helpful, the boy chooses to escape life altogether rather than fight an intolerable situation. Searching through a telescope, he spots his dead mother in the night sky. He responds by hanging himself from a beam in the attic, "launch[ing] his flight into space" (p. 190), to join her and so regain the nurturing he needs. Once more, the victimized child doesn't find escape or resolution in life, much as O'Connor never discovered a cure on earth for her disorder.

Even in these literary fantasies, then, rebellion and escape do not help the wounded while they are alive. Ultimately, O'Connor's documentary eclipses her dream; the self, as figured by father-child relationships in these stories, cannot be healed on earth, but, rather, remains fractured at the dark, violent conclusion of each tale. Mary and Norton can't heal those relationships because they are doomed by an uncaring Mr. "Fortune" and a "Sheppard" that leads them astray. Again, on some level O'Connor is recording her life, not a fiction. The author was destined by fortune to die of an autoimmune disease and "led astray" by her father's physical legacy. There was no remedy for her on earth so, like Mary and Norton, she looked to religion or another world for cure.

Considering Flannery O'Connor's profound acquaintance with the serious, chronic condition Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, the illness's imprint on her fiction in the form of the diseased family is hard to discount. O'Connor may have insisted that "my disease is of no consequence to my writing." Nevertheless, if we ignore the striking signs in her stories that her life with lupus haunted her, then we further obscure tales that are already oblique, and we fail to recognize the powerful effects serious illness can have on the imagination. O'Connor should not be reduced to her disease, to her faith, or to any other one aspect of her life. At the same time, her disease should not be reduced by her readers. Lupus taught her bitter lessons that she came to frame in her fiction. Most fundamentally she learned, as the young invalid [End Page 129] Ashbury discovers in "The Enduring Chill," the fact that "blood don't lie" and that hers was coded for destruction.